

Albright on Communication, Information and Negotiation

Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright shares her secrets for persuading people even tougher than Larry Ellison to do what you want.

Interview by Abbie Lundberg and Meridith Levinson

CIOs [chief information officers] can learn a lot from diplomats and government leaders, both in terms of negotiating with and influencing people, and in regard to the way information is gathered, filtered and shared. As U.S. Secretary of State and, before that, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright had dealings with some of the smartest--and some of the most notorious--leaders on the planet. CIO Editor in Chief Abbie Lundberg and Senior Writer Meridith Levinson spoke with Albright at the CIO | 05 conference in Scottsdale, Ariz. We asked what she had learned during her years at the apex of the national information and policy pyramid.

CIO: What's the most important thing to keep in mind when you're in a critical negotiation with someone whose views and agenda are quite different from your own?

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT: There are really two things. You have to know what it is you want. You can't go into a negotiation without clarity about what your objective is. The other [critical piece] is almost the exact opposite, which is trying to get into the other person's shoes. If you don't understand what they have to get out of it, you can't figure out what steps they can take to give you what you want.

You've always done a tremendous amount of research before going into negotiating situations. How do you operate when you can't get the information you need?

Well, you really try to avoid that. Normally, I would have a lot of information before I went in. But when you don't have an embassy, it's hard to get the kind of information you need. When I was talking to Kim Jong Il of North Korea, we didn't have that much information about him. We knew that at that stage (in 2000), he had a nuclear potential. We were concerned about his missile technology. But our information on him was pretty sketchy, and our intelligence information basically said he was crazy. But once I talked to him and once Kim Dae-jung, the president of South Korea, had talked to him, it was evident he wasn't crazy. So you had to figure out what was going on in his mind. That probably was the hardest part, because we don't really have a functional relationship with them.

So how did you approach Kim Jong Il in that first meeting?

The thing you learn is that you have to listen. I would normally let the other party talk first and elicit things from them with simple questions. If you just go in and start talking first and lay down your position, you never really know where the other person is coming from.

CIOs sometimes have to deliver bad news to their bosses or boards of directors that could threaten their careers. What's the best way to deliver bad news effectively?

If you have a tough message to deliver, you have to deliver it straight. You have to make sure that the message, whatever it is, is clearly received. Otherwise, invariably, somebody will come back and say, "Well, that isn't what I got out of what you said." You need to make sure that there is no question about what it is you actually said.

How would you do that?

For the most part, you try to get the person in subsequent conversations to repeat what you said. Not by saying, "Repeat to me what I just told you," but you go back to the subject to see if they fully understood. If they start acting like the relationship still goes on as it was before, then you know they didn't understand.

It was standard practice for you to have one-on-one conversations with fellow Cabinet members or ambassadors before important meetings. What's the value of conducting these pre-meeting meetings?

You want to do as much as you can ahead of time. It's part of the preparation for a meeting. It helped me find out who was where, who would be my ally in something. Sometimes [the goal was to get someone else] to present an idea that we had so that it wasn't the United States saying this in a foreign negotiation.

You used this approach in the effort to replace Boutros-Ghali with Kofi Annan as Secretary General of the United Nations by urging various African nations to champion Annan as an alternative.

I call that "letting somebody else have your way." It's a very important thing. The other thing that is very important is that you can't take credit for everything. You have to let somebody else get the kudos sometimes, and ultimately it gets back to you.

In your book [Madam Secretary], you describe many personal things you did for people, whether you were dealing with colleagues in the U.S. government or foreign leaders.

That may be a girl thing, but I do think that it helps because we're all human. If you try to show some interest in the person you're talking to, I think it helps in the long run. I have to say in all fairness that I used to switch signals. I'd be very nice, and then I'd let 'em have it.

You're vocal about women's issues and the challenges you faced working in predominantly male environments. Some women CIOs are reluctant to discuss such challenges. Why do you think this is?

I actually think I am too. I talk about it now, but I didn't exactly spend my entire time going around saying, "You're not treating me well as a woman." If you set yourself up as a victim, you become a victim. And mostly operating in a male world, you try not to be somebody who's always got everybody's teeth on edge. You want to blend in.

The thing that made all the difference for me (and I don't know exactly how to say this) is that I was representing the United States. That was a sign that the United States thought it was important that women should have an important role. A female CIO is just one of many. It's a good idea to work with other women so that you develop some kind of a support system. And sometimes, when a situation is egregious, then you have to step out. But for the most part, people don't like angry women, and you don't get ahead that way. But you can't be made a victim, and you can't allow things to pass. It's hard. My U.N. thing and what I did as secretary, it made a big difference that I was representing the United States.

What role do you see large corporations having on the world stage?

They can play an important role. Multinational corporations can help and be partners rather than adversaries with countries. And governments could be helpful to them in negotiating trade and intellectual property rights and the like. As secretary, I liked meeting with business leaders, because they have great information about what's happening on the ground. But it's essential that American corporations be good citizens wherever they are in the world. They have to be seen as adding, not exploiting, in terms of human rights, the environment and other issues.

What are your thoughts about privacy rights versus national security?

The question is: What's a derogation of human rights, and what's just irritating? I get wanded every time I go through an airport. That's not a derogation of rights; it's just irritating. But I've run into a lot of booksellers and librarians, and they've made me see that the Patriot Act is a misnomer. Tracking what people read is more a derogation of rights. My students, for example, who write papers on terrorism, wonder how much they're being checked up on. We've swung in the wrong direction.

As the chief architect of American foreign policy, you were at the apex of a pyramid designed to sift through incredible amounts of information, with a huge staff all trying to keep you as informed as possible to make good decisions. Was the system by which people delivered information to you sufficient? Or did you have to go outside this apparatus to get in touch with reality?

Every morning a pamphlet would come from the intelligence and research sections of the State Department, and it would have summarized all the information that had come in overnight and put it within a historical and diplomatic context. A CIA person would come and give me the president's daily brief, as well as the longer CIA overnight book. Then there would be a variety of papers from other intelligence sources.

This information is just product, and the policy-maker is the consumer. You have to triangulate [among the different sources]. And it's up to the consumer to pull the pieces together and make sense of it. This is why I'm so stunned about what happened over in Iraq. Everything I ever read was couched with all kinds of caveats: "This is from X source that we don't know about," or "DIA

[Defense Intelligence Agency] disagrees with the CIA...." They never said, "This is what has actually happened."

You do need input from the outside, but it has to be presented in a way that's useful, not highly theoretical. I noticed this first in the Carter administration. The Soviets had invaded Afghanistan, and we brought in some high-level people in the foreign policy elite. There was a complete disconnect between the experts and academics on the outside and the people on the inside making the decisions. And behind all this are human beings. Somebody at a lower level is doing the research, and it filters up. You rely on the original person to not make a mistake. As things become revealed, you have to question that.

I personally believed there were WMDs, based on information I'd had all along and the fact that inspectors had not accounted for all the weapons. So by deduction, I thought they were there.

Intelligence communities are trying to find better ways to share information. Should agencies be combined into one superagency?

We need to get cooperation between the CIA and FBI. They have been proprietary and haven't shared. It is essential that we share. It's the only way we can deal with terrorists--by tracking money and figuring out who they are, where they're going and who's in charge. But information is just the raw material. That's why selecting the right leaders is so important.

I think certain parts can be combined. On the other hand, I liked the idea of having competing information. I liked doing all the reading and finding out who had the better source. There's got to be some way the agencies can work better together. If there were a way to avoid duplication and get them to work better together toward getting the important information, and getting everything into the system, I'd be for it.

How come the FBI knew nothing on 9/10 and everything on 9/12?

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